

*Media*

*file 1A6*

## Nuclear thefts and facts

A new disclosure about past nuclear theft has come at the same time as the announcement of a nuclear recycling process that could inhibit future nuclear theft. The coincidence underscores the urgency of safeguarding nuclear energy as it spreads, developing the technical means to minimize nuclear hazards, and speeding the development of solar and other alternative technologies to reduce the world's period of dependence on nuclear power.

A necessary minimum of nuclear power is candor and factual accuracy by those charged with developing and regulating it. There must be no repetition of what now appears to be the misleading testimony to Congress last summer. At that time the executive director of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) told a House subcommittee there was no evidence of theft or diversion of significant amounts of "special nuclear material" in all the incidents investigated by the NRC. Included was one at a plant in Apollo, Pennsylvania, where a loss of more than 200 pounds of weapons-grade uranium had occurred in the mid-'60's.

This week the NRC director, Lee Gossick, acknowledged to this committee that his previous testimony was "incomplete," which seems to be a euphemism for wrong, though not intentionally so. He said that he meant no evidence of theft had been found since 1968, a few years after the uranium was gone. Presumably there is evidence of theft or diversion, at least before then, and the public and Congress ought to be made aware of it in order to ensure safeguards against repetition.

One of the key questions is whether the

missing uranium was smuggled to another country. Just last month, under the valuable pressure of the Freedom of Information Act, the CIA released a 1974 report which concluded that Israel had already produced nuclear weapons. One reason for this judgment was Israel's acquisition of large quantities of uranium, "partly by clandestine means." Reportedly there has been a recurring suspicion within the government that some of this uranium came from Apollo, Pennsylvania. Last fall the White House discounted such suspicions. In view of Mr. Gossick's new testimony, and an extensive NRC study said to back it up, are there further clarifications that can be made about what happened to the missing uranium? Not to mention 8,000 pounds of highly enriched uranium and plutonium unaccounted for elsewhere in the U.S.

Meanwhile there is the encouraging news about a new recycling system for processing plutonium, another nuclear weapons ingredient used for producing nuclear power. This system would keep the plutonium from being purified to a weapons-grade stage that would be inviting to thieves.

Also, earlier this month, Congress passed legislation tightening controls on U.S. nuclear exports to prevent their use for weapons development.

Each step of progress is welcome. But it can be properly evaluated only if people have the facts. Representative Udall said, after Mr. Gossick's testimony, that the NRC seemed prone to protect nuclear power from its critics, keeping full knowledge from the public. Any such cover-up must stop.